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WASHINGTON — With a bumper poppy harvest expected in Afghanistan in the new year, a debate has erupted within the Bush administration on whether the United States should push for the crop's destruction despite the objections of the Afghan government.

Some U.S. officials advocate aerial spraying to reduce the opium crop, warning that if harvested, it could flood the West with heroin, fill the coffers of Taliban fighters and fund terrorist activity in Afghanistan and beyond. They estimate the haul could earn Afghan warlords up to \$7 billion, up from a record \$2.2 billion in 2004.

With the January planting season approaching, the State Department is asking Congress to earmark nearly \$780 million in aid to Afghanistan, the world's largest opium producer, for a counter-narcotics effort that would include \$152 million for aerial eradication.

Although Afghan President Hamid Karzai has declared a "jihad" against the drug trade, he has vetoed aerial spraying. And his stance is supported by some U.S. officials, who warn that attempts at mass crop eradication in spring, during the campaign season for parliamentary elections scheduled for April, will alienate rural voters. Instead, they argue for a delay in crop eradication but a vigorous crackdown on drug traffickers.

The dispute underscores a vexing dilemma for the United States. Having ousted the Taliban from power, the Bush administration now finds that its three main policy objectives in the strategically important country — counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and political stability — appear to be contradictory.

President Bush's Cabinet has discussed the problem, sources said, and the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan met with Bush in December. But the White House has reportedly not made a final decision.

"We still don't have a policy," a senior Republican congressional aide said on condition of anonymity.

The arguments over Afghan policy have cut across the usual administration lines, dividing policymakers within the State Department, National Security Council and Pentagon, administration and congressional sources said.

Some diplomats as well as many outside experts argue that aerial spraying, in particular, would be folly.

"You tell them, 'You're voting for a new democratic country,' while their government is allowing foreigners to come in and destroy their livelihood?" said Barnett R. Rubin, who was an advisor to the U.N. in Afghanistan in 2001. "And if you try to destroy it and have the economy decline by 10%, 20%, 40% in one year, what will the result be? The result will be armed revolt."

Instead of trying to eradicate this year's poppy crop, the U.S. and Afghan governments should focus on providing alternative livelihoods for farmers, improving law enforcement and drug interdiction. Eradication should only be considered once the political climate is more stable, argued Mark L. Schneider, a former Peace Corps director now at the International Crisis Group.

Aerial spraying, Schneider warned, would be tantamount to "providing the Taliban with a great recruiting slogan: 'Go with us, or they'll spray you.' "

Other administration officials and lawmakers warn that allowing the Afghan economy to become dependent on narco-profits could be even more dangerous.

One official noted that the Sept. 11 commission estimated that it had cost only \$400,000 to \$500,000 to carry out the terrorist attacks on the United States. "Imagine what they can do with \$10 billion. You [can] own a country with that much money."

Advocates of an aggressive strategy worry that warlords could use drug profits to influence the coming election. And they argue for swift intervention before next year's harvest further swells the warlords' coffers.

Robert B. Charles, assistant secretary of State for international narcotics and law enforcement, has asserted in testimony before Congress that drug profits are "almost definitely" funding the Taliban, which once banned opium farming, and possibly Al Qaeda as well.

According to Charles, the profits are also flowing to the Hezb-i-Islami faction led by warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The terrorist group, which has staged attacks aimed at driving U.S. forces out of Afghanistan, is loosely allied with the Taliban and has ties to Osama bin Laden.

The U.S. government estimates that poppy cultivation exploded from 150,000 acres in 2003 to 510,000 acres in 2004 — much higher than an earlier U.N. estimate of 324,000 acres. That works out to potential profits of up to \$7 billion, says Rep. Mark Steven Kirk (R-Ill.), who follows counter-narcotics efforts from the House Appropriations Committee.

Worse, according to the United Nations, opium poppies are now grown in all 34 Afghan provinces, up from 18 provinces in 1999 and just eight provinces in 1994. (Afghanistan created two provinces in 2004.) The explosion in cultivation suggests that Afghan drug traffickers are offering agricultural advice, and possibly credit to farmers who are switching to the lucrative cash crop, officials said.

For the Bush administration, one of the most contentious issues is the role of the military in the drug war. The Pentagon has been opposed to becoming involved in counter-narcotics efforts, viewing it as "mission creep" that distracts from the military's main job of battling insurgents.

Moreover, U.S. commanders fear that villagers will stop giving support and tips about insurgent activity if American soldiers begin interfering with their biggest source of income. In addition, many drug traffickers have been U.S. allies in the continuing struggle against the Taliban.

But the State Department and a number of lawmakers have been lobbying the military for more

than a year to help the counter-narcotics effort, arguing that squeezing drug profits is essential to strangling the insurgency.

And although the Pentagon is increasingly sympathetic to the argument, sources said, the State Department and Drug Enforcement Administration want it to do more: step up intelligence-gathering on drug traffickers, target and destroy drug laboratories, and participate in special anti-drug operations.

A senior administration official argued that "the single most effective way" to fight the drug trade in Afghanistan would be for the Pentagon to order that opium processing laboratories and heroin storage facilities be treated like other "core military targets."

Under the State Department's budget proposal, Congress would set aside nearly \$780 million in aid to Afghanistan over the next three years for counter-narcotics programs: \$173 million for interdiction, \$180 million for law enforcement, \$5 million for a public information campaign, including broadcasting anti-drug messages from supportive mullahs, \$120 million for programs to develop alternative livelihoods for farmers, and nearly \$300 million for eradication programs.

Congress is expected to approve the funding. "We have a record opium production that needs to be lowered because so many of the profits are used to finance Bin Laden and his operation," Rep. Kirk said. "On the other hand, you have to conduct an anti-drug campaign first and foremost with political sensitivity."

The eradication budget calls for \$138 million for manual destruction — physically cutting or burning crops — starting in mid-January or early February in Helmand province in the south, and \$152 million for aerial spraying beginning in March.

But foes say it is politically unwise and potentially dangerous to public health and the environment.

The senior GOP aide argued that aerial spraying could become a public relations nightmare, with the United States forced to "explain to our Al Jazeera listeners that we're not literally

poisoning to death" the Muslim population.

U.S. officials say the herbicide used is a very diluted form of Monsanto's Roundup, a glyphosate that is approved for use in American gardens and has been sprayed safely in Colombia and elsewhere. They note that anti-drug crews trying to destroy fields on the ground would need armed protection in many areas. And they say the sheer size of the Afghan crop makes aerial spraying the only real option.

"History shows that not a country in the world has been able to eradicate the crop manually," the senior administration official said.

Immediately after his inauguration last month, Karzai held a conference with tribal leaders to discuss the drug problem. But the president is worried about the health and environmental effects of spraying as well as the political fallout, another senior U.S. official said. His plan relies on public appeals, better law enforcement and some manual eradication. The Afghans have told U.S. officials they can cut and burn more than 74,000 acres this year.

In an effort to change Karzai's mind, some U.S. officials want him to speak with officials in Colombia about the threat drug traffickers can pose.

But the second official, noting that Karzai is a newly elected head of a sovereign nation, said the U.S. must not try to pressure him.

"I don't want to get into our internal fight except to say that I believe it will be foolish to push for aerial [spraying] at this point," the official said. "But I wouldn't rule it out indefinitely. We will have to see if the Karzai plan produces the results he anticipates."